The Light in the Clearing

A Tale of the North Country in the Time of Silas Wright

By IRVING BACHELLER

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-No ye didn't, nuther. Yer too young Mebbe ye seen her when she was old an' broke down, but that wa'n't Kate —no more'n I'm Bill Tweedy, which I ain't. Kate was as handsome as a golden robin. Hair yeller as his breast an' feet as spry as his wings an' a voice as sweet as his song, an' eyes as bright as his'n—yis, sir—ye couldn't beat her fer looks. That was years and years ago. Her mother died when Kate was ten year old—there's her grave in there with the sickle an' the sheaf an' the portry on it. That was unfort'nit an' no mistake. Course the squire married ag'in but the new wife wa'n't no kind of a mother to the girl an' you know, mister, there was a young scoundrel here by the name o' Grimshaw. His father was a rich man —owned the cooper shop an' the sawmill an' the tannery an' a lot o' cleared land down in the valley. He kep' comp'ny with her fer two or three year. Then all of a sudden folks began to talk—the women in partic'lar. Ye know men invented heli an' women keep up the fire. Kate didn't look right to 'em. Fust we knew, young Grimshaw had dropped her an' was keepin' comp'ny with another gal—yis, sir. Do ye know why?"

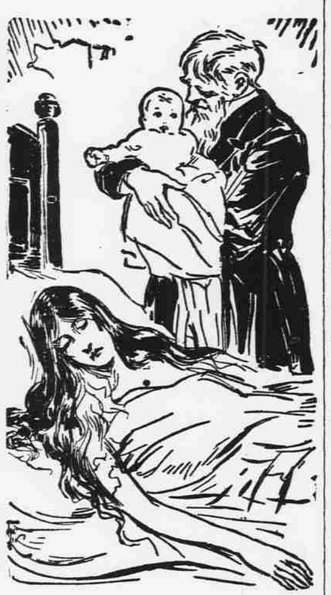
Before I could answer he went on:

"No ye don't—leastways I don't believe ye do. It was 'cause her father was richer'n the squire an' had promised his gal ten thousan' dollars the day she was married. All of a sudden Kate disappeared. We didn't know what had happened fer a long time.

"One day the ol' squire got me to dig this grave an' put up the headstone an' then he tol' me the story. He turned the poor gal out o' doors. God o' Israel! It was in the night—yis, sir—it was in the night that he sent her away. Goldarn him! He didn't have no more heart than a grasshopper—no, sir—not a bit. I could 'a' brained him with my shovel. but I didn't.

"I found out where the gal had gone an' I follered her—yis I did—found her in the poorhouse way over on Pussley Hill—uh huh! She jes' put her arms 'round my neck an' cried an' cried. I guess 'twas 'cause I looked kind o' friendly—uh huh! I tol' her she should come right over to our house an' stay jest as long as she wanted to as soon as she got well—yis, sir, I did.

"She was sick all summer long—kind o' out o' her head, ye know, an' I used to go over hossback an' take things fer her to eat. An' one day when I was over there they was wonderin' what they was goin' to do with her little baby. I took it in my arms



I Took It in My Arms.

an' I'll be gol dummed if it didn't grab hold o' my nose an' hang on like a puppy to a root. When they tried to take it away it grabbed its fingers into my whiskers an' hollered like a panther—yis, sir. Wal, ye know I jes' fetched that little baby boy home in my arms, ay uh! My wife scolded me like Sam Hill—yis, sir—she had five of her own. I tol' her I was goin' to take it back in a day er two but after it had been in the house three days ye couldn't 'a' pulled it away from her with a windlass.

"We brought him up an' he was alwuss a good boy. We called him Enoch—Enoch Rone—did ye ever hear the name?"

"'No.'

"I didn't think 'twas likely but I'm alwuss hopin'.

"Early that fall Kate got better an' left the poorhouse afoot. Went away somewheres—nobody knew where. Some said she'd crossed the lake an' gone away over into York state, some said she'd drowned herself. By'm by we heard that she'd gone way over into St. Lawrence county where Silas Wright lives an' where young Grimshaw had settled down after he got married.

"Wal, 'bout five year ago the squire buried his second wife—there 'tis over in there back o' Kate's with the little speckled angel on it. Nobody had seen the squire outside o' his house for years until the funeral—he was crippled so with rheumatiz. After that he lived all 'lone in the big house with ol' Tom Linney an' his wife, who've worked there for 'bout forty year, I guess.

"Wal, sir, fust we knew Kate was there in the house livin' with her father. We wouldn't 'a' knowed it, then, if it hadn't been that Tom Linney come over one day an' said he guessed the ol' squire wanted to see me—no, sir, we wouldn't—fer the squire ain't sociable an' the neighbors never darken his door. She must 'a' come in the night, jest as she went—nobody see her go an' nobody see her come, an' that's a fact. Wal, one day las' fall after the leaves was off an' they could see a corner o' my house through the bushes, Tom was walkin' the ol' man 'round the room. All to once he stopped an' p'inted at my house through the winder an' kep' p'intin'. Tom come over an' said he ca'llated the squire wanted to see me. So I went there. Kate met me at the door. Gosh! How old an' kind o' broke down she looked! But I knew her the minute I set my eyes on her—uh huh—an' she knew me—yis, sir—she smiled an' tears come to her eyes an' she patted my hand like she wanted to tell me that she hadn't forgot, but she never said a word—not a word. The ol' squire had the palsy, so 't he couldn't use his hands an' his throat was paralyzed—couldn't speak nor nothin'. Where do ye suppose he was when I found him?"

"In bed?" I asked.

"No, sir—no, siree! He was in hell —that's where he was—reg'lar ol' fashioned, down-east hell, burnin' with fire an' brimstun, that he'd had the agency for an' had recommended to every sinner in the neighborhood. He was settin' in his room. God o' Isr'el! You orto 'a' seen the motions he made with his hands an' the way he tried to speak when I went in there, but all I could hear was jest a long yell an' a kind of a rattle in his throat. Heavens an' airth! how desperit he tried to spit out the thing that was gnawin' his vitals. Ag'in an' ag'in he'd try to tell me. Lord God! how he did work!"

"All to once it come acrost me what he wanted—quick as ye could say scat. He wanted to have Kate's headstun took down an' put away—that's what he wanted. The stun was kind o' layin' on his stummick an' painin' of him day an' night. He couldn't stan' it. He knew that he was goin' to die purty soon an' that Kate would come here an' see it an' that everybody would see her standin' here by her own grave, an' it worried him. It was kind o' like a fire in his belly.

"I guess, too, he couldn't bear the idee of layin' down fer his las' sleep beside that hell hole he'd dug fer Kate —no, sir!

"Wal, ye know, mister, I jes' shook my head an' never let on that I knew what he meant an' let him wiggle an' twist like a worm on a hot griddle, an' beller like a cut bull 'til he fell back in a swoon.

"Damn him! it don't give him no rest. He tries to tell everybody he sees—that's what they say. He bellers day an' night an' if you go down there he'll beller to you an' you'll know what it's about, but the others don't.

"You an' me are the only ones that knows the secret, I guess. Some day, 'fore he dies, I'm goin' to take up that headstun an' hide it, but he'll never know it's done—no, sir—not 'til he gits to the judgment seat, anyway."

The old man rose and straightened himself and blew out his breath and brushed his hands upon his trousers by way of stepping down into this world again out of the close and dusty loft of his memory. But I called him back.

"What has become of Enoch?" I asked.

"Wal, sir, Enoch started off West 'bout three year ago an' we ain't heard a word from him since that day—nary a word, mister. I suppose we will some time. He grew into a good man, but there was a kind of a queer streak in the blood, as ye might say, on both sides kind o'. We've wrote letters out to Wisconsin, where he was p'intin' for, an' to places on the way, but we can't git no news 'bout him. Mebbe he was killed by the Injuns."

We walked out of the graveyard together in silence.

I could see a glimmer of a light in the thicket of pines down the valley. I unhitched and mounted my horse.

"Take the first turn to the right," said the old man as he picked up his scythe.

"I'm very much obliged to you," I said.

"No ye ain't, nuther," he answered. "Leastways there ain't no reason why ye should be."

My horse, impatient as ever to find the end of the road, hurried me along and in a moment or two we were down under the pine grove that surrounded the house of old Squire Fullerton—a big, stone house with a graveled road around it. A great black dog came barking and growling at me from the front porch. I rode around the house and he followed. Beyond the windows I could see the gleam of candlelight and moving figures. A man came out of the back door as I neared it.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"My name is Barton Baynes from St. Lawrence county. Kate Fullerton is my friend and I wish to see her."

"Come up to the steps, sor. Don't git off yer horse—'til I've chained the dog. Kate'll be out in a minute."

He chained the dog to the hitching post and as he did so a loud, long, wailing cry broke the silence of the house. It put me in mind of the complaint of the damned which I remembered hearing the minister describe years before at the little schoolhouse in Lickitysplit. How it harrowed me!

The man went into the house. Soon he came out of the door with a lighted candle in his hand, a woman following. How vividly I remember the little murmur of delight that came from her lips when he held the candle so that its light fell upon my face! I jumped off my horse and gave the reins to the man and put my arms around the poor woman, whom I loved for her sorrows and for my debt to her, and rained kisses upon her withered cheek. Oh God! what a moment it was for both of us!

The way she held me to her breast and patted my shoulder and said "my boy!"—in a low, faint, treble voice so like that of a child—it is one of the best memories that I take with me into the ... life now so near, from which there is no returning.

She led me into the house. She looked very neat now—in a black gown over which was a spotless white apron and collar of lace—and much more slender than when I had seen her last. She took me into a large room in the front of the house with a carpet and furniture, handsome once but now worn and decrepit. Old, time-stained engravings of scenes from the Bible, framed in wood, hung on the walls.

I told all that I had heard from home and of my life in Cobleskill but observed, presently, a faraway look in her eyes and judged that she was not hearing me. She whispered:

"Sally?"

"She has been at school in Albany for a year," I said. "She is at home now and I am going to see her."

"You love Sally?" she whispered.

"Better than I love my life."

Again she whispered: "Get married!"

"We hope to in 1844. I have agreed to meet her by the big pine tree on the river bank at eleven o'clock the third of June, 1844. We are looking forward to that day."

A tall, slim woman entered the room then and said that supper was ready. Kate rose with a smile and I followed her into the dining room where two tables were spread. One had certain dishes on it and a white cover, frayed and worn. She led me to the other table which was neatly covered with snowy linen. The tall woman served a supper on deep blue china, cooked as only they could cook in old New England. Meanwhile I could hear the voice of the aged squire—a weird, empty, inhuman voice it was, utterly cut off from his intelligence. It came out of the troubled depths of his misery.

So that house—the scene of his great sin which would presently lie down with him in the dust—was flooded, a hundred times a day, by the unhappy spirit of its master. In the dead of the night I heard its despair echoing through the silent chambers.

Kate said little as we ate, or as we sat together in the shabby, great room after supper, but she seemed to enjoy my talk and I went into the details of my personal history.

The look on her face, even while I was speaking, indicated that her thoughts wandered, restlessly, in the gloomy desert of her past. I thought of that gay, birdlike youth of hers of which the old man with the scythe had told me, and wondered. As I was thinking of this there came a cry from the aged squire so loud and doleful that it startled me and I turned and looked toward the open door.

Kate rose and came to my side and leaned toward my ear whispering:

"It is my father. He is always thinking of when I was a girl. He wants me."

She bade me good night and left the room. Doubtless it was the outraged, departed spirit of that golden time which was haunting the old squire. A Bible lay on the table near me and I sat reading it for an hour or so. A tall clock in a corner solemnly tolled the hour of nine. In came the tall woman and asked me in the brogue of the Irish:

"Would you like to go to bed?"

"Yes, I am tired."

She took a candle and led me up a broad oaken stairway and into a room

She Took a Candle and Led Me Up a Broad Oaken Stairway.

of the most generous proportions. A big four-post bedstead, draped in white, stood against a wall. The bed, sheeted in old linen, had quilted covers. The room was noticeably clean; its furniture of old mahogany and its carpet comparatively unworn.

When I undressed I dreaded to put out the candle. For the first time in years I had a kind of child-fear of the night. But I went to bed at last and slept rather fitfully, waking often when the cries of the old squire came flooding through the walls. How I longed for the light of the morning! It came at last and I rose and dressed and went out of doors.

Kate met me at the door when I went back into the house and kissed my cheek and again I heard those half-spoken words: "My boy." I ate my breakfast with her and when I was about to get into my saddle at the door I gave her a hug and, as she tenderly patted my cheek, a smile lighted her countenance so that it seemed to shine upon me. I have never forgotten its serenity and sweetness.

(Continued next week.)